

Oatlands Historic District
Main House
U. S. Rt. 15
Leesburg vicinity
Loudoun County
Virginia

HABS No. VA-949-A

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

1/10/67

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

OATLANDS HISTORIC DISTRICT, MAIN HOUSE HABS No. VA-949-A

Location: U.S. Rt. 15, Leesburg vicinity, Loudoun County, Virginia.
(.9 mi. N. of Goose Creek, .5 mi. NE of Rt. 15, 1 mi. S. of intersection of Rt. 15 and Rt. 651).

Present Owner and Occupant: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, NW., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Present Use: Historic House Museum.

Significance: Oatlands house, which was under construction in 1805, was built for George Carter, son of Robert "Councillor" Carter of Nomini Hall, and great-grandson of Robert "King" Carter of Corotoman. The land on which the house was built was part of a 63,093 acre tract which Councillor Carter had purchased in 1776 from the estate of Lord Fairfax, proprietor of the Northern Neck. The original house and its subsequent changes reflect a transition from late Georgian to early Federal style architecture in Virginia and, along with surviving outbuildings and gardens, remains a significant example of an early nineteenth century plantation complex.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Under construction in 1805.
2. Architect: Unknown. According to tradition, George Carter, the owner/builder, planned the house.
3. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Unknown. Correspondence to George Carter in 1805 refers to "old Wright" neglecting Carter's house with impending winter making delay critical--thus suggesting the name Wright as an overseer of construction. The name Henry A. Webster and "Alexandria," appears in pencil on a beam located in the west entrance porch, with no indication of date or whether the association is with construction or materials. The Corinthian capitals of the portico were ordered in 1827 from Henry A. Farnham, "architectural carver," No. 183 Grant Street, New York, following designs from William Chambers, A Treatise on Civil Architecture in which the Principles of That Art Are Laid Down (London, 1768).
4. Notes on original plan and construction: No original plans are known. It is believed that the mansion was originally composed of three parts, constructed without the two story semi-octagonal stair wings and without the portico and roof parapets. The house as originally constructed appears to have reflected taste

of the "Georgian" period, incorporating a three story center block and flanking two story wings, with a center entrance surmounted by a Palladian window. An octagonal drum remains at the apex of the hip roof, suggesting the early existence of a cupola. Physical evidence also suggests that the house as originally constructed was not stuccoed. The plan may have been influenced by early architectural pattern books, such as Robert Morris' Select Architecture, published in London in 1755. In general spatial arrangements, and the use of the octagonal drawing room and stair halls, the house as completed has similarities to Jefferson's early plan for Monticello.

5. Historical events and persons connected with the structure: George Carter, who built Oatlands as his country estate, was a great grandson of Robert Carter of Corotoman (known as "King" Carter) and fifteenth of seventeen children of "Councillor" Robert and Ann Tasker Carter of Nomini Hall in Westmoreland County, Virginia.

Robert "King" Carter was one of the stewards for Thomas, Lord Fairfax. Through skillful handling of his own affairs he obtained numerous official positions and eventually became perhaps the wealthiest man in the colony. The resulting estates enabled the Carter family to dominate land holdings in the "Northern Neck" region of Virginia, extending from the Chesapeake Bay to the Shenandoah River. "King" Carter's descendants built some of the most significant eighteenth-century Virginia mansions, including Berkeley, Sabine Hall, Rosewell, Nomini Hall, Cleve and Carter's Grove.

The land on which Oatlands stands was once part of a 63,000 acre tract purchased by Robert Carter from Lord Fairfax in 1776. In 1798, Robert Carter divided his vast land holdings and plantations into ten equal portions for disbursement by lottery to his surviving children. George Carter, the younger of only two surviving sons drew lot number seven, which deeded to him several tracts in Loudoun County and one along Difficult Run. Robert Carter later described portion number seven as containing "a moiety of Goose Creek division, say about 3,408 acres, part of a tract of land commonly called Bull-Run Tract. . . also 130 acres joining thereto, laying in Prince William county; also a grand tract of land on Difficult-Run, containing about 330 acres in Fairfax County."

By the fall of 1798, George Carter was in possession of his tract in Loudoun County, writing to his father from "Goose Creek near Leesburg, County of Loudoun." In that year, George wrote describing the land as a "grazing farm," indicated that he would not be able to meet his \$100 obligation to his father due to heavy expenses (including the purchase of plantation "stock" and

"utensils") and that the house in which he lived was "much out of repair." Presumably this dwelling was modest structure already in existence on the tract when George inherited it.

George's father Robert died in Baltimore in 1804, leaving George sole executor of his estate. In addition to his portion of the Goose Creek tract, George inherited all of Carter's personal property in Virginia and Maryland--houses, money, bonds, plate, furniture, and books. From 1801 to 1808, George Carter was listed in Baltimore city directories as "Gentleman, living at Green Street," and correspondence directed to him at Philadelphia during this period was sometimes marked with the notation: "Should Mr. Carter have left Philadelphia this letter must be sent to Baltimore."

In spite of initial difficulties, Carter's Loudoun estate began to flourish shortly after he received it. By 1801, George had identified his place of residence as Oatlands. By 1805, one year after his father's death, Carter's friend and nearby plantation owner Thomas Ludwell Lee (who was married to George's second cousin Fanny Carter of Sabine Hall) wrote to Carter sympathizing with a plight which appears to involve beginning construction of his house. Lee wrote: "Old Wright must not only be a scoundrel but Fool also to neglect your house in the manner he does,. . . for to you now delay must be a most serious evil, as the winter will press you suppose the workmen use the utmost expedition. . ."

At least as early as December 1807, Carter and others in Loudoun County began actively seeking improvement of local roads and in that year he was appointed overseer of the road from Goose Creek at Whiteleys Ford to Little River. This coincided with the opening of the Little River Turnpike from Alexandria to Aldie in 1806, the result of ambitions to extend the commercial benefit of Alexandria's busy port to the interior of Virginia and its numerous Goose Creek mills. No doubt increasing interest in the flour trade was a stimulus to the development of Loudoun interests and it was only four years later that the town of Aldie was chartered. In fact, Carter served as a Director of the Little River Turnpike after 1817.

With the County rapidly developing, Carter, in 1809, agreed to assist in obtaining patent rights to the "labour saving machines" of the famous inventor, Oliver Evans, on behalf of his prominent neighbor at Aldie, Charles Fenton Mercer. Mercer, upon whose land the town of Aldie was chartered, wished to install the advanced system of milling in his own mill, the "Aldie Mill." In 1815, Carter wrote to Evans on his own behalf, wishing to obtain the patent rights and certain milling equipment for his own "merchant mill" which he was about

building 30 by 35 feet." By 1816, the mill was in operation. This was the same year in which Carter rendered a bill to President James Monroe for "sowing for you." In 1805 Monroe had inherited the neighboring Oak Mill estate from his uncle Joseph Jones, but did not begin construction on his mansion "Oak Hill" until 1821. That year Monroe apparently admired Oatlands because the Alexandria Gazette reported on October 6, 1819 that acquisition of Oatlands for Monroe's use had been proposed. James Hoban and others involved with construction on the rebuilding of the capital and the "President's House" were involved in the design and construction of Oak Hill which has led to speculation that the changes of Oatlands during the 1820's might in some way have been related to Hoban's activity at nearby Oak Hill. So far research has not substantiated this theory.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The original appearance of Oatlands must remain conjectural, as many changes have occurred over the years. Much physical evidence has been gathered which indicates that the house, rather than being systematically completed and subsequently altered, evolved structurally over a period of perhaps as many as thirty years. Physical evidence indicates that most of these changes probably occurred during the period from 1825-35. The most significant stylistic changes in the house appear to have occurred around or shortly before 1827. In that year the capitals were ordered for columns for the portico--the stone plinths for which had already been cut. At least sometime after 1815 (and possibly at the same time the portico was conceived) the demi-octagonal stair wings were added (the east stair wing was probably constructed first), the original stairs, located in what is now designated as the breakfast room (room 102) were removed, and scored stucco added to the surface of the house. The cupola was removed at an undetermined time, possibly around 1820.

Certain interior elaboration seems to have taken place concurrently with various structural changes. Stylistic evidence suggests that the ceiling medallion and cornice of the entrance hall are later in period. The pilasters on each side of the entrance doorway are similar in detail to the monumental columns of the portico, particularly in the use of stopped fluting. This may indicate completion of the entrance hall around the time the portico was laid out (c. 1827). Mouldings in the drawing room are typical of those found c. 1830-40 during the height of the Greek Revival period and incorporate bullseye corner blocks, also typical of the period. On the second floor, physical investigation of paint and plaster also indicates that certain portions of the interior may not have been finished until around 1830. There is evidence that plastering of all second floor ceilings was delayed until sometime around that time.

When Mr. and Mrs. William Corcoran Eustis purchased the mansion in 1903, they made certain alterations. New floors were added in many of the rooms (over old floors); the mantel from the center second floor bedroom (room 208) was

moved to the drawing room (room 105); and the mantel from the library (room 106) was exchanged with the mantel from the second floor east bedroom (room 207). In the drawing room, the window opening on the north walls was extended to the floor and jib doors were installed below.

On the second floor, a north-south partition was removed from the center bedroom (room 208) and the fireplace and hearth on the west wall were removed and sealed. Stairs and partition were removed from the former stair hall (room 202) and new stairs were installed. Bathrooms were added in the east and west stair wings.

On the third floor, existing stairs were removed and new stairs were installed. Partitions and pine floors were installed to create servants' closet and bath; new floor and partitions were installed to create one large store room in the unfinished attic. Skylight and steps to it were installed.

In the basement, cement floors were added throughout and several partitions added. Sometime after the major 1903 restoration plans the pantry wall was extended on the north and east, creating a rectangular excrecence above grade on the northeast corner of the house.

On the north facade, a semi-octagonal porch was added to the projecting bay of the drawing room, a later iron cap replaced the original stone capping, and a tin roof replaced the earlier copper roof.

Norris and Company, Leesburg, Virginia, was employed for replacement and repair of mill work, and instructions were given stating that all original mill work requiring replacement be duplicated.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This data was given to the Historic American Buildings Survey by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.